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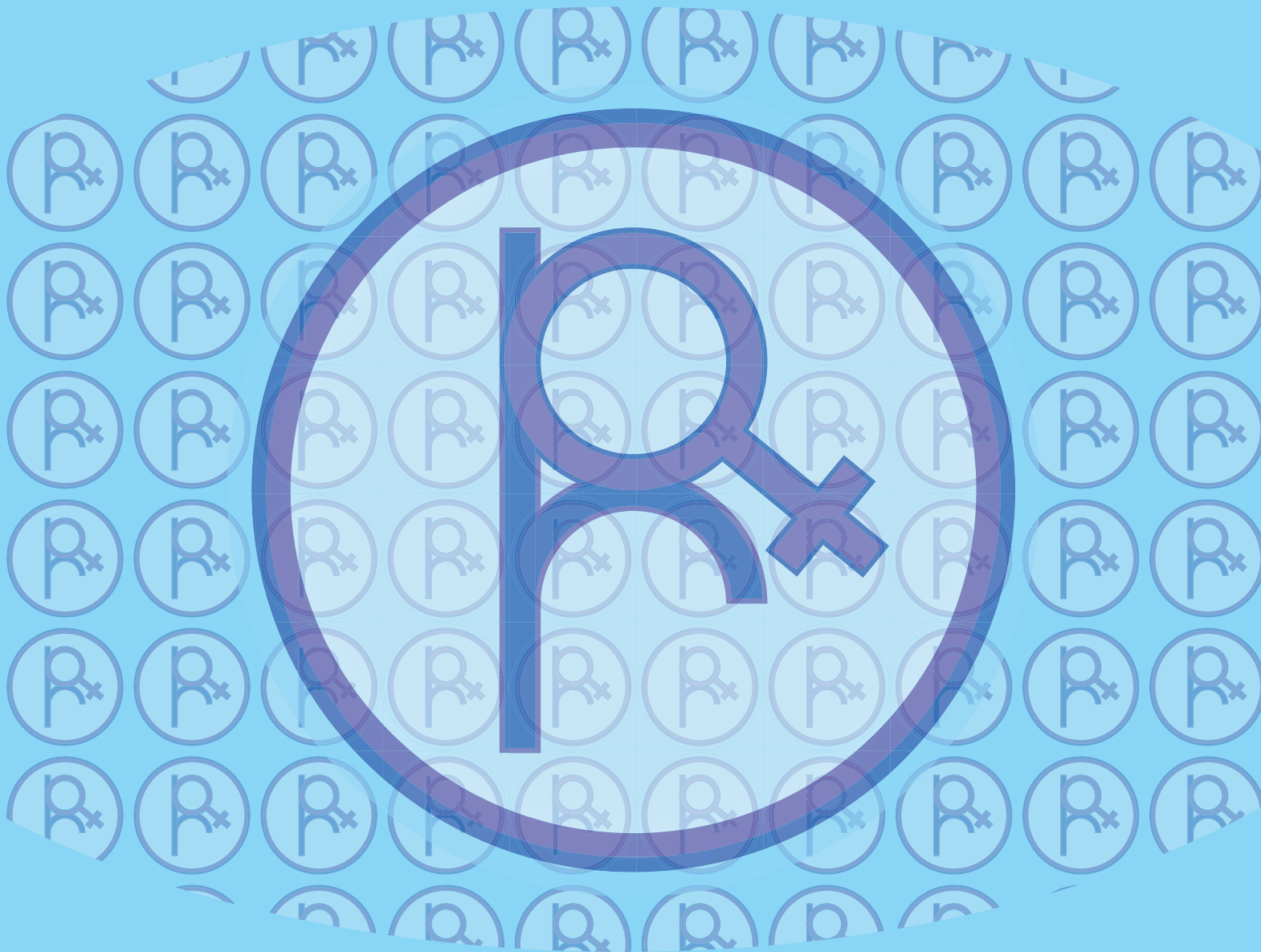
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Women in Public Relations in the Czech Republic



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Associate Professor Denisa Hejlova, PhD is a leading Czech scholar and communication consultant. She focuses on research, education and practice in public relations, public affairs, trust management and strategic communication.

Since 2011, Denisa is heading the department of Marketing Communication and PR at Charles University in Prague, one of the most-wanted study programmes in the Czech Republic. Before taking this role, she has served as an associate dean for PR. She was also a PR manager at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Denisa was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Columbia University in New York.

In 2015, Denisa published a comprehensive book about Public Relations for the Czech audience. In 2020, she has opened the first Czech MA in Strategic Communication at Charles University.

Summary

This study is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with women working in the public relations industry (communication agencies or in-house departments) in the Czech Republic. Among interviewees were seven communication managers from middle or top management and eight public relations professionals who were not managing their own teams. The research aimed to explore lived experiences of women working in public relations and communication, the office culture, socialisation and leadership.

Results show that interviewed women were raised in a democratic, liberal environment, where girls were equally motivated to study and pursue a career as boys. Their office environment is mostly open, informal, without any strict dress code. Women don't perceive the work environment as masculine or blokish, yet sometimes they mentioned discriminating behaviour in masculine style coming from women bosses. However, women struggle significantly when it comes to balancing family life (childcare) and career in PR.

Some interviewees stated openly that they had to change jobs and that they perceive the nature of some jobs in communication, such as spokesperson, as incompatible with having children. Women have also stated that they sometimes struggle with explaining the meaning and benefits of the public relations profession to their relatives or society. The stereotype "communication technician" described by Broom in 1982 appears today as well – men are attributed more strategic, long-term goals, whereas women are considered and self-describing as those who "do the work", e.g. finalize tasks. The research has brought new insight into the professional life of women employees and managers in communication. Finally, we categorized the main clusters of barriers in pursuing a career in higher managerial positions.

Introduction

Although there is rather an extensive body of research, analysing the role of women in public relations, only limited research has been focusing on Central and Eastern European countries. In this study, we are focusing on analysing and describing the situation in the Czech Republic. Firstly, we will describe the country's cultural, social and political characteristics, which predetermine strongly, the role of women in society. Secondly, it's necessary to describe the state of the local public relations field and also the professionalization of public relations. Thirdly, we conducted a qualitative analysis with semi-structured interviews with women professionals in the field of communication, and the findings are presented and discussed.

The question of women, their role and professional development in public relations have been of interest to mainly U.S. scholars since the 1980s (Broom, 1982; Hon et al, 1992; Grunig et al, 2013). The role of gender has been perceived as crucial in public relations for several reasons, such as a high number of women working in the field, and different self-perceptions of their professional role between men and women (e.g., men related more to their expert prescriber role, but women related more to the „communication technician“ as their dominant role) (Broom, 1982). Scholars have raised questions and examined the gender inequality problems, such as a gap in public relations salaries, the “glass ceiling” and career issues, gender issues in leadership style and management as well as broader questions of diversity in public relations (Grunig et al, 2013).

In Europe, the feminist approach to research and examining the gender roles within a public relations profession has been also widely researched. Since the 1980s, over 200 articles were published (Topić et al., 2019, Topić et al., 2020). Since the 1980s, studies have shown similar trends as in the U.S., e.g. that women see themselves merely as a technical staff with fewer responsibilities and therefore they expect smaller salary (Tench et al., 2017). A project examining the role of women in public relations was established within European Research and Education Association (EUPRERA) (Topić et al., 2019). So far, there is no existing body of research focusing on the gender issues or women's role within the profession of public relations in CEE countries, namely those within the European Union (such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia or Hungary). The gender issues themselves are well described and are a subject of many national and EU research and public policy projects (Roth, 2008; Havelková, 2017), yet this does

not mean the gender issues are swiftly translated to social policies, anti-discrimination laws nor practice (Havelková, 2017).

Importantly, the public relations profession cannot be simply compared across countries without bearing a wider context in mind: communication practices are closely linked to cultural, social, economic and political characteristics. We cannot simply compare the public relations profession in the U.S., China and Russia, because the societal values, political limitations, freedom of speech, development and ownership of media, etc. varies significantly. Therefore, firstly, we will describe the Czech Republic's cultural, social and political characteristics, which are necessary to understand the local context of women's role and career life in the society.

Within the history of the nation, Czech women were granted general voting rights in 1919 and since 1920, full gender equality between men and women in political, social and cultural life was granted within the Czechoslovak Constitution in February 1920. The founding father and first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (in office 1918–1935) claimed himself „a feminist“ and adopted a surname of his American wife Charlotte Garrigue. Formally, Czechoslovakia was thus among the first European countries who set women's right in law and promoted them in practice, especially in the aspect of higher education for women.

However, during the Communist era, the role of women in society was strongly directed by the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which officially promoted women's emancipation in need of a women's workforce and ideological surveillance over the children's education in state institutions, but in reality, it fostered double burden and unequal gender distribution of work. As Havelková (2017) notes, the „gender curtain“ has prevailed as a dividing difference between the „East“ and „West“ long after the fall of Communism in 1989. Regarding the women's role in Czech society, it's necessary to mention some sociological facts, which are specific to the Czech society in comparison to neighbouring countries. Czech society has a significantly lower level of religiosity in the general population compared to neighbouring countries. For example, 72 % of Czechs do not identify with a religious group and 66 % don't believe in God, compared to 86 % of religious citizens in Poland and 59 % in Hungary (Pew Research Center, 2017). There's a high social tolerance for divorce if the family „doesn't work out“ (73 %) and the majority of people prefer a family with two kids (66 %). In addition to that, 42 % of kids are born to single or unmarried mothers (CVVM, 2020).

The usual length of paid maternity leave (so-called „mateřská dovolená“, e.g. maternity „vacation“ in exact translation) is 28 weeks, followed by parental leave, which can last up to four years. Compared for example to the U.S. practice, where women often follow the model of „stay-at-home mother“ or get back to work as early as six weeks after birth, the social system and social expectations of women in the Czech Republic are rather different. The majority of women stay on leave for three years with each child, which makes a substantial gap in their professional careers (Fraňková, 2020). The Czech Republic thus ranks among the top countries with the highest gender pay gap in European Union. According to a study examining the gender pay gap among Czech Information and Communication Technology professionals, the gender pay gap is gradually decreasing and dropped almost to zero among young workers on equal positions with equal education under the age of 30 (this implies mostly before the birth of the first child) (Nedomova et al., 2021).

Secondly, it's necessary to describe the state of the local public relations field and also the professionalization of public relations. According to the data from the European Communication Monitor, women experience more stress in their job than men (30 % of women report serious stress problems compared to 24,9 % of men) (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 80). Note that the Czech Republic ranks among the countries with the least serious stress problems (80 % of interviewees declare no or manageable stress problems) (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 79). Women report stress from heavy workloads, constant availability outside working time (e.g. mails, phone calls) and lack of opportunity for growth and advancement (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 85). The report has also proven a salary gap between men and women at the highest hierarchical positions – only 8,7 % of women earn more than 150.000 EUR per year, compared to 21,2 % of men (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 111). However, this result does not show the situation for all women, e.g. women are heads of communication more often in NGO or government sector, where the salaries are generally lower than in corporations or private companies.

The Czech public relations market represents a fully developed democratic society with a wide range of commercial companies, state institutions and governmental organisations, non-governmental sector and individuals who are using the services of public relations and communication professionals, either in-house, through an agency or in individual consultations and ad-hoc projects (Kasl Kollmannová, 2013; Hejlová, 2014). Unfortunately, there are no more detailed quantitative data available about the gender ratio in public relations, pay gap salary, number of women among company leaders in communications, etc.

Method and Conceptual Framework

For this project, we used the method of semi-structured interviews with public relations and communication professionals (Flick et al., 2004). Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to conduct an interview according to a pre-set scenario, and also to ask additional questions to understand the context and meanings. The conceptual framework and methodology of this study are based on sociological theory and organisational theory.

The interviewees were recruited through personal contacts and snowball technique through a private group of communication professionals on social media. The interviewees were preselected based on their gender, e.g. only women were asked to participate in an interview. No other criteria were significant – the interviewees could come from different fields, such as finance or cultural public relations, agency, in-house or consultants, and from various stages and career levels. Despite the difficulties in recruiting interviewees during the Covid-19 pandemic (interviewees stated that they are overworked, they don't want to spend another hour in front of the screen, etc.), we managed to recruit interviewees from entry-level positions, middle-management and two most senior professionals in this field.

All interviews were conducted online in February, March and April 2021 during the pandemic situation and the Covid-19 lockdown in the Czech Republic. The interviewees were asked to sign an informed agreement document, where they obtained information, how their personal data will be stored, analysed and later deleted. The interviewee's data were anonymised and personal data, as well as names of other companies and people, were deleted. The interviews were conducted by the author of this publication and trained assistant students of the Department of Marketing Communication and Public Relations at Charles University. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. The data were then open coded based on the structure of the interview to categories of (1) lived experiences, (2) the office culture, and (3) socialisation and leadership. The questionnaire was structured accordingly to those three areas. Firstly, the lived experience of women working in public relations explored their working hours, work-life balance, career path and the possibility of pursuing a career in public relations.

Secondly, the office culture examined the organisational formal and informal structure and culture. The questions were focusing on networking possibilities (yet this was limited due to the pandemic situation), dress code, informal relationships with colleagues, informal communication topics, and social interactions. Interviewees were asked also to talk about possible gender specifics or differences, which affect their organisation's culture. Thirdly, interviewees were asked about their upbringing and socialisation process. The questions asked about their family background and style of parental upbringing, their access to education, etc. Another set of questions, which was more elaborated for the interviewees who were in leading positions, asked about their leadership style, experiences, role models, etc. Interviewees in leading positions were additionally asked about some obstacles in their career, which could be gender-related, such as pay-gap, whether they have experienced sexism or disadvantages in their job because of their gender, whether they prefer to work with men or women, etc. as well as potential or experienced threats concerning their professional development, based on gender or expected social gender-based behaviour.

The overall aim of this research was to examine the lived experiences of the gender differences within the industry, which are described above in the introduction. We strived to ask not only about their professional, but also personal life in terms of the self-evaluation and perceiving of their social and professional role of the interviewees.

The demographics of the interviewees are shown in table 1 below. All the interviewees came from the Czech Republic and were based in Prague, or they represented an agency or company which resides in the capital city. Due to the pandemic situation, some interviewees were currently residing out of the capital city, nevertheless, their usual working place was Prague. Out of 15 interviewees, five were from middle management positions and two directors. In total, there were seven people who are team leaders and eight team members (employees). The interviewees were coming from different sectors, e.g. banking, finance, technology, research and education, culture, retail, lifestyle etc., and they were all employed (no consultant on a full-time basis). All interviewees completed university education.

Table 1 Demographics of Interviewees

Interviewee No.	Type of Company	In-house, agency or consultant	Years of Experience	Employee or Manager
R1	Finance	in-house	6	Manager
R2	NGO	in-house	15	Manager
R3	Technology	agency	12	Director
R4	Government organisation	in-house	8	Employee
R5	Government organisation	in-house	20	Employee
R6	Corporation	in-house	10	Manager
R7	Retail	agency	4	Employee
R8	Lifestyle	agency	5	Employee
R9	Government organisation	in-house	20	Employee
R10	Government organisation	in-house	7	Manager
R11	PR Agency	agency	27	Director
R12	PR Agency	agency	8	Employee
R13	Government organisation	in-house	7	Employee
R14	Finance	in-house	10	Manager
R15	Retail	in-house	6	Employee

Source: own data

Findings

Firstly, we have to acknowledge that some of the answers and lived experiences were affected by the lockdown situation. The pandemic situation in the Czech Republic has affected social and work life since March 2020. At the time of the interviews (February – April 2021), the interviewees were living almost a year more or less limited in their personal and professional life due to pandemic measures. The vast majority of the interviewees were on home-office and some have struggled with the work-life balance due to the online education and demands on managing the family and raising the children. Therefore, it was also difficult to find the time to conduct the interviews for both the researchers and the interviewees. During the pandemic situation, the Czech Republic experienced several lockdowns, when offices, but also schools and kindergartens (sometimes even outside playgrounds) were closed. The question of socialisation was also strongly affected by the limitations due to the Covid-19 restrictions. Nevertheless, the interviewees were usually referring to the “normal state” or “before Covid-19” situation.

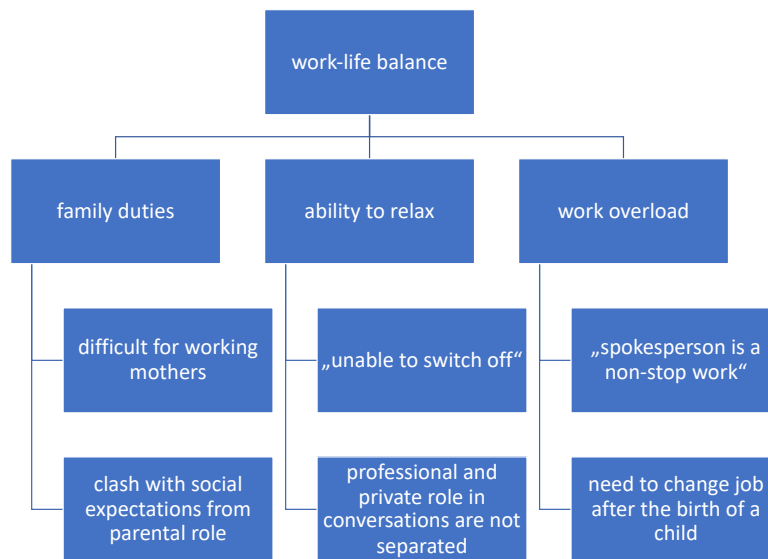
The findings are structured in the three areas, defined above, examining the lived experiences, the office culture and socialisation and leadership.

Lived Experiences of Women in Public Relations

Based on the open coding of the interviewee’s answers, we identified several emotions and feelings, which were associated with their work in the public relations industry. In this part, we’ve focused on potential or experienced threats concerning their professional development, based on gender or expected social gender-based behaviour – both professionally, and personally. We’ve categorized the topics under two key issues: work-life balance and gender role, which we wanted to analyse more deeply.

Firstly, we’ve explored the work-life balance of women in public relations. We identified three clusters, which women expressed repeatedly: (1) family duties, (2) the ability to relax, (3) and work overload (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Lived Experiences: Work-Life Balance



Source: Own data

We will now have a closer look at the **work-life balance** cluster. The responses ranged from manageable workload to constant overload. The work overload was explained either (a) as the nature of the job, or (b) as individual incompetence to limit the workload, or (c) temporarily matter, usually in the times of responding to a crisis situation. Work overload was explained (a) as an **inevitable nature of the job** and characteristics of work in the industry. For example,

“As a spokesperson, you must have the phone always on.” (R5)

“Previously, when I worked for a client from an airline business, the boss told me to print out the crisis communication manual and leave it on the bedside table, because the plane can crash at 4 AM.” (R2)

Women also mentioned that their work does not finish when they close the door,

“I start my day when I wake up, I open the monitoring. I reply to my emails on my way to the office. I leave at 5 or 6 but on the way back home I still work. My husband says I finish at 11 PM but that’s not true. We have evenings, weekends and I also manage to do sports in the morning regularly.” (R1)

“It’s a non-stop involvement. The work doesn’t ask about the office hours.” (R3)

Some interviewees stated they have experienced extreme workload and impossible management of their free time, that they had to change job. This life experience was mentioned by interviewees who previously worked both at PR agency (R2) or state institution (R5),

“In the agency, everything was on fire... I had to gradually work on knowing my limits. I’m undergoing coaching therapy to be able to refuse some work offers, but it’s still hard for me to say no to a new client [as an independent consultant].” (R2)

The workload is thus considered as something which „is normal“, „is a part of the job“. Women often stated that the nature of work in public relations and communication is not linked to “office hours”, especially when the person is also responsible as a spokesperson. We have to note that **family duties and work-life balance** concerning taking care of the household and the family have changed during the Covid-19. Some interviewees stated that they welcome the lockdown because it has helped them to manage multitasking duties, such as doing the laundry during meetings.

The workload is more negatively perceived by working mothers. Two interviewees said that inflexibility or overload were the main reasons they had to quit after having a child (R5, R9). Some interviewees stated that the work-life balance in public relations is manageable, with the exceptions of **temporary work overload**, especially when handling a crisis situation of a client. For example,

“When I returned back to full-time work in the office with a small kid [3 Y.O.], it was extremely difficult. I was the first in the morning who gave the kid to the kindergarten and the last who picked it up. I couldn’t cope. I had to ask a grandmother and even my husband had to help sometimes. In the end I had to give up the job. I’d have to hire a nanny....” (R5)

Note that this arises from social expectations from the parental role, which is culturally grounded in the Czech Republic (especially in older generations). Women often ask their grandmothers to help with babysitting and childcare, but other options, as fathers or nannies are perceived as something exceptional, “out of the social rules”. We can see this in the example of a statement

“*I’d have to hire a nanny...*” (R5), which is considered as an extreme solution and the woman rather gives up her position to fulfil her societal role as a mother. Even young women without a family think of this possibility as a possible obstruction:

“I’ve never experienced any problem in my career, because of my gender. But kids can be a problem. I think a woman always needs to decide whether she wants to work or be at home with kids.” (R4)

We will analyse this aspect more deeply in the third section, where we analyse the expectations of the social roles of women.

Ability to relax

Some interviewees have noted that the nature of their work is impossible to “get out of the head” at the end of office hours. They also sometimes keep personal friendship relationships with people from similar fields (university graduates, etc.) and they often talk about work-related issues both at work and privately. No interviewee mentioned she has only gender-specific topics among their friends. For example,

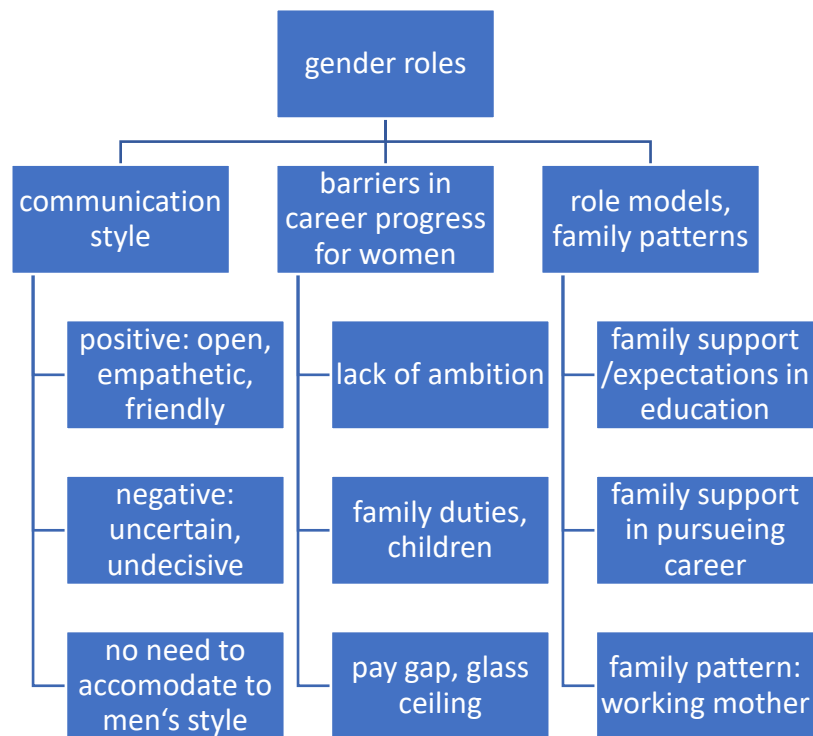
“I have a lot of friends from the advertising business, from in-house communication departments, film production... we’re all in the same kind of business, so naturally we talk about everything that’s going on [in communication]. For example, we couldn’t avoid criticising the government communication [during the pandemic]” (R3)

The public relations profession has been praised by many interviewees as a field that is welcoming to women but only to those women who have personal predispositions, such as extraversion, persistence, low-risk aversion, etc. Interviewees also mentioned that they struggle with work-time balance sometimes and that keeping a balance is a **personal competence**, something they have to learn or had to learn in the past as a part of their professional growth. For example,

“I’ve been working recently to make my work-life balance better... Even when I’m at the home office, I try to structure the time and relax, go for walks, etc.” (R10)

In gender roles, we've categorized three clusters: (1) communication style, (2) barriers in career progress for women, and (3) role models and family patterns that influence the social role and professional career of interviewees.

Figure 2. Lived Experiences: Gender Roles



Source: Own Data

Communication style

A vast majority of interviewees stated that their communication style is open, friendly and empathetic. Only one interviewee stated that she's "somehow strict", but her friends describe her as a friendly person (R15). Most of the interviewees refused that they'd need to accommodate their communication style to their boss.

"I didn't need to accommodate my communication style with my [male] boss at all. He's very informal, but he's respected." (R4)

Only a minimum of interviewees stated that they needed to accommodate their communication style – either at the beginnings of their career, or when talking to the top-level management, or

in specific cases. They also mention that they sometimes struggle with fast decision making or that they had to learn from their bosses how to make the right decisions and get more self-confidence in professional life. For example,

„At the start [of my career], I felt like I need to defend my place, I had only clients from the technology sector... I had a feeling I need to persuade them that I'm an adequate person for discussion... It has both helped me, that I was a young woman, and not helped me too.” (R2)

“I need to accommodate my communication style when I communicate not with my boss, but with the board members. I need to smile less, be more decisive, adapt to the masculine style of communication. There are only three women out of 20 on the board.” (R6)

Concerning their personality, most of the interviewees describe themselves as self-confident, friendly, empathetic (in a sense of sensitivity to people) and emotional (in a positive meaning as competent to use emotions in the communication). The interviewees did not identify themselves as aggressive and politically savvy. Moreover, some interviewees mentioned sale skills as a necessary part of the job – to acquire new clients or business. Interviewees felt confident in their managerial and also analytical skills. Some of the more junior interviewees (employees) stated that they lack the confidence to make decisions.

Barriers in career progress

Many interviewees perceive the field of public relations as “woman-friendly”, as a field, where you can pursue a professional career without any gender-based obstacles.

„[In public relations as a woman] you can reach your goals you can achieve them, you have a chance to star“ (R1)

On the other hand, the major obstacle in women's career is considered „the family“.

„If you want to do the job well, it needs a lot of time and this might be a barrier for women [because of their family life]. (R11)

Gender inequality, pay gap, sexism or glass ceiling is not perceived as barriers in pursuing a career, yet all of the interviewees were familiar with these concepts and problems and they've thought and discussed them before. Younger interviewees state that they perceive the support of working mothers as growing. „*I feel that this is changing rapidly, financial PR is progressive, women can now work part-time, there are company kindergartens.*“ (R1) But they also admit some uncertainties, how they will cope with their own children and family (note that only two women among the interviewees had children), „*Generally, there is no gender inequality in public relations - we differentiate people based on their skills, not gender,*“ quoted a director of a PR agency (R11). We will analyse this aspect more deeply in socialisation and social expectations of women.

The pay gap and glass ceiling

Concerning the pay gap, women either refuse that they would be disadvantaged or admit that they have been disadvantaged in the past. Younger interviewees are more confident that they are treated equally.

“I'm sure there's no pay gap [in my organisation - governmental organisation]. We're all equal, men and women. The professional experience makes a [financial] difference.”
(R4)

But interviewees only with a slightly longer career admit they feel they've been treated unequally when it comes to salary:

“I feel like I had to fight for my salary much more than if I was a man. I had to be more self-confident to ask for the money. It's because women underestimate themselves and they are afraid to ask for the same salary as men.” (R6)

Contradictions occasionally appear, e.g. one interviewee stated in one interview: „*I never felt disadvantaged as a woman in my career*“ and later „*I'm sure that in the past I experienced pay gap which this has changed now*“ (R1). This could be interpreted as a cognitive dissonance, where a woman, who's been raised very independently, is self-confident and wants to pursue a career in her life, doesn't want to admit that she'd be somehow disadvantaged.

One interviewee stated that she understands the matter of pay gap also as a question of choices:

“I feel that there is firstly a pay gap. Men are usually more in the business or corporations, where the communication positions are better paid. Women are in the state sector [where the salaries are lower]” (R5).

Interviewees don't feel that the women would be underpaid because of their gender, but because of their experience, responsibilities, or sector, they work at,

“There are actually more women working in PR, but in executive roles, there is a majority of men. The salaries of women are lower because their job positions are lower. I don't think that women are discriminated against in their salaries.” (R9)

Parental influence and role models

We asked the interviewees about their private life, their upbringing, family situation and parental influence. Many interviewees stated that their atmosphere and style of upbringing was either “liberal” or “democratic” and that they were raised as independent personalities. Some interviewees have noted the family pattern, where both parents work and pursue a career, which has influenced their life expectations. Not even one interviewee described the family situation as dramatic or disadvantaged. For example,

“I was the only child in my family. [My father was busy] I saw him only at the weekends and my Mum have passed an attestation just became a medical doctor, so she always put me somewhere [to childcare]. My relationship with my Mum was very equal, she gave me a lot of freedom... on the other hand, I was a “good girl”, I liked to study, I was thoroughgoing.” (R2)

It is important to stress that the Czech Republic has equal access to education for both men and women and currently, there's a higher percentage of women studying at the university than men. Women represent also a higher percentage of university graduates (about 60 %). Simultaneously, the interviewees have mentioned that they felt supported to choose a university education and pursue a career (note that all interviewees have achieved a university degree). There is no tuition

at the public universities and state programmes for socially disadvantaged students, so there is not such an economic barrier for young people to study. Most of the graduates stated that they felt it's obvious, it's natural, or even given that they will get a university degree. For example,

“I’ve always felt that my parents support me in my career and going to the university. It was even unthinkable that I wouldn’t go to a university, this was out of the question. But I could choose what I wanted to do.” (R4)

“My Mum is a strong career woman, for a long time she’s had the highest salary. In my family, women are strong and ambitious.” (R15)

Overall, the interviewees describe their family background as liberal, with a focus on personal freedom and responsibility. They often quote the key role model of a working mother and support from parents in personal development. For example,

“My Mum has worked full-time since I was one year old, it seemed normal to me that a mother works. Women in my family worked equally as men.” (R9)

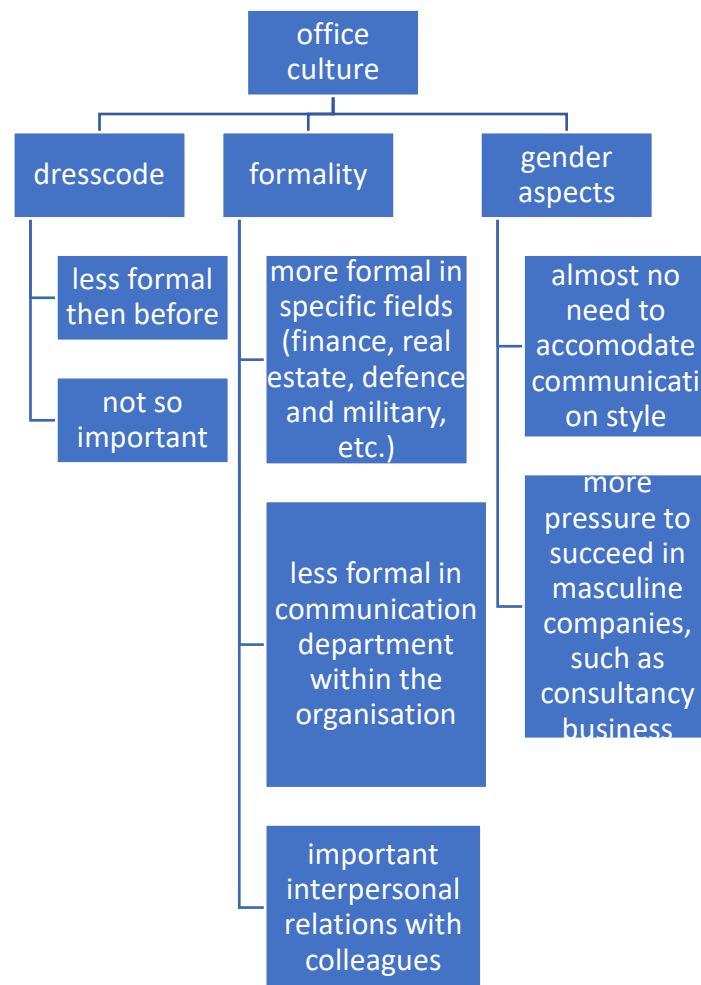
“My parents valued education a lot. Since I was 13, they’ve sent me to many language courses abroad, they’ve travelled with me and supported me in my personal development.” (R10)

To sum up, liberal and democratic upbringing with the accent on the university education was very similar for all our interviewees across all ages and positions. Of course, this does not represent the whole society and surely people are coming from different backgrounds or families.

The Office Culture

The office culture depends on many factors and varies from organisation to organisation. We’ve categorized three clusters: dress code, formality and gender aspects of office culture (e.g. gender-differentiated conversations, masculine atmosphere etc.). (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Office Culture



Source: Own Data

No interviewee mentioned that she would need to follow a strict or even written dress code. Dress code was often perceived as a thing of the past (even pre-Covid times) or something related to specific businesses as diplomacy, finances, consultancy, real estate or defence and the liminary sector.

“When I worked at the Government Office, of course, that there was an expected dress code and everybody knew we had to follow unwritten rules, apart from Fridays, which were less formal. But you never knew when you entered the building when you will meet diplomats, politicians or this kind of people and you need to represent the office.” (R5)

“[Our office culture] is much more relaxed now than let’s say about ten years ago. Before, women had to wear heels at least 4 to 5 cm high.” (R6)

“The office culture in our communication department is very informal. In fact, it’s so informal that colleagues from other departments feel envy for us. It’s because we’re of similar age [young, 25–35 years], the overall style of our organisation is rather conservative, and we don’t have to follow it. Of course, everybody has a jacket in the closet and if it’s needed for the camera, we put it on.” (R4)

Interviewees have mostly described their office culture as very relaxed, informal, oriented on fostering friendly relationships rather than competitive. They did not specify any gender differences in office culture, concerning topics of conversation, hierarchy, team buildings, etc.

“We talk about all sort of things, the current situation politics, but also food, family etc. We meet at birthday parties, and also at press conferences.” (R7)

The merger of private and professional culture appears when an employee mentions a press conference as an opportunity to socialize both with journalists and their colleagues.

No interviewee mentioned any toxic masculinity or oppression from men. They felt very relaxed about the gender balance and relationships without a need for some stricter social control. Some interviewees stated that they welcome informal relationships between men and women which allow them to socialize and build relationships, even personal, but with mutual consent.

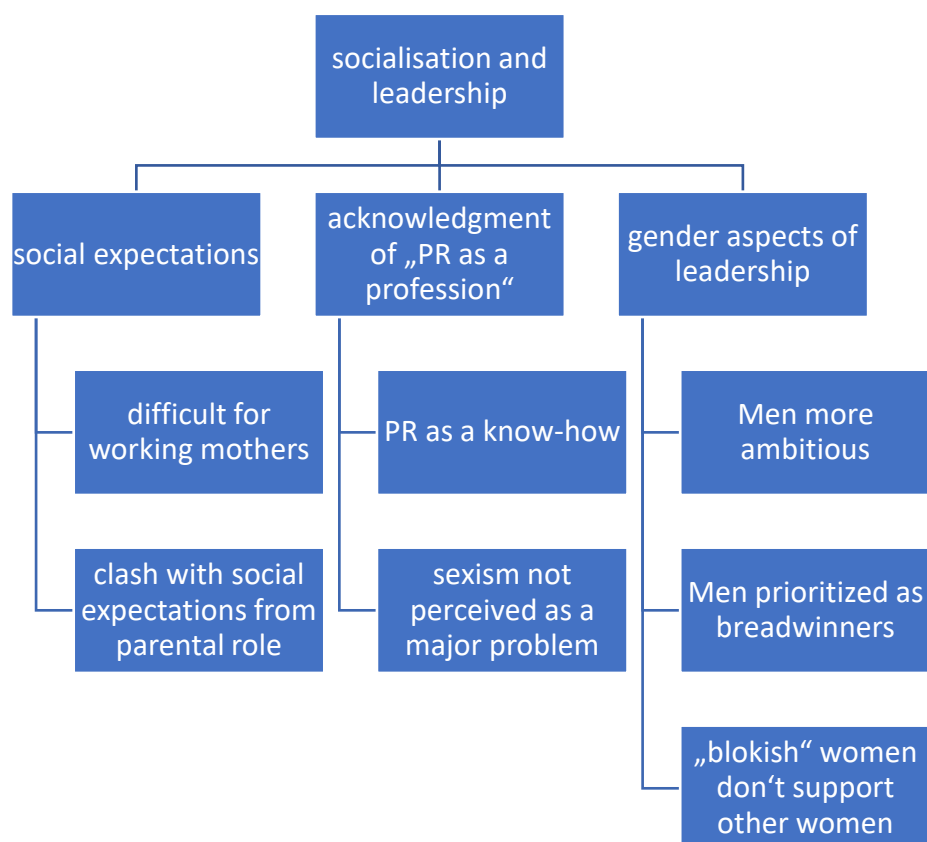
“It never happened to me, but in my previous job, I’ve heard about sexual harassment case and the guy was fired... Nobody would tolerate such behaviour... But on the other hand, we can be as men and women. In the end, I did meet my husband in the office...” (R6)

To sum up, interviewees mentioned that office culture is important to them and that they appreciate a culture of trust and open communication. They also appreciated the trend of loosening the formal criteria, like a dress code, yet on the other hand, they still felt that some kind of formal wear is necessary for public speaking and presenting to a client.

The Socialisation and Leadership

When we've talked about socialisation and leadership, the interviewees mentioned many aspects, which can be clustered in three clusters: 1) the clash of social expectations from their role as a professional and as a mother, 2) social approval of a public relations job as a "professional career", which is a source of self-evaluation and self-esteem in society, and 3) various gender aspects of leadership (ambitions seen as masculine value, prioritizing man's job in parental care, and "blokish" women leaders, who are seen as a major obstacle in a women's career).

Figure 4. Socialisation and Leadership



Source: Own Data

As we've mentioned above, the situation is extremely difficult especially for working mothers, both in terms of clash with the unwritten expectations from their maternal role (e. g. using professional nannies is observed as the extreme, not as a social norm), and in terms of social structural obstacles, such as lack of pre-kindergarten care, half-time positions, etc.

Especially professionals with longer career and family state that the clash of the professional and maternal role is incompatible. Both of the interviewees, who had children, had to change jobs because they didn't manage to balance the duties both in the office and at home. For example,

“I wanted to go back after 9 months [after the birth of the child], but it didn't work out... I had to change the company. (...) After I had a second child and I worked as a part-time consultant [during parental leave, e.g. 3 years] and then I returned to my previous company. But I kind of missed all the company's projects for working mothers, and it was hard.” (R9)

“Women don't thrive for higher positions because they chose the family. If they wanted to pursue a career in PR, there are no limits.” (R9)

„At that time when I had a child, I felt public relations is merely a men's job and they'd rather choose a man because he'd be more flexible and wouldn't have children. But this has shifted gradually. I see the social change happened about five years ago.“ (R5)

The situation, where a woman needs to choose between “the job” and “the family” is seen as inevitable and crucial. We find that this point is the key result of the analysis. Women take this topic seriously, they discuss it with much more energy and importance than for example when talking about the office culture or sexism. The conversations about sexism are also important to be interpreted in a certain intercultural context. The interviewed women felt more “feminine” and they didn't use the words to describe their style which is considered as masculine or blokish, such as aggressivity, etc.

“I did meet probably some sexism, but it's nothing I'd experience as a lifelong injustice. (...) I don't think it's sexism if someone compliments on your look.” (R3)

„I haven't experienced sexism because the people working in finances are well-behaved“ (R1)

Gender aspects of leadership

Women have stated that they perceive their male colleagues as more ambitious and more self-confident even at the same level of experience or expertise as women. Sometimes, they also mentioned in conversations stereotypes that could be linked to the “technician role” in communication (Broom, 1982), where men lead the team or presentations, and women “do the rest”.

“I see men like to kick off the strategic meeting and then it’s up to women to do the rest.”
(R5)

“Women tend to choose the conventional path. Guys go off the beaten track. I see strategic ambitions even among very junior guys.” (R3)

Women who declared that their woman boss has adopted a “masculine” style of leadership have evaluated this kind of communication style negatively. In some cases, interviewees interpreted “blokish” behaviour of their women-bosses as extremely annoying, almost unbearable.

“In my previous job [ICT sector, joint-stock company], my boss suppressed my family needs. She was very careerist, worked long hours, she wanted everybody to be like her.”
(R1)

Almost the same experience was quoted by interviewee R9. This concept of a “careerist woman” can be interpreted as masculine, “blokish”, self-centred and definitely negative in relation to work-life balance. According to the interviewees, the women who want to “be equal to men” are described as actually more demanding and less empathetic than men. For example,

The “masculine” style of women’s leadership is associated with directive control and a lack of trust towards the subordinates.

“She controlled everything, there were thorough approval processes and micro-management.” (R10)

On the other hand, the men bosses were not described in this kind of “masculine” style. Interviewees usually mentioned their openness, trust, freedom to make their own decisions, ability to acquire new business, etc. Interestingly, some interviewees described their male leaders with traditionally “female” characteristics as empathy, openness or friendliness. Some interviewees mentioned they’ve experienced ageism (in this case meaning the lack of trust in young professionals) from both men and women. One interviewee stated that she had the experience twice gender-related problems in her previous job with a woman.

“I feel like that man acts straighter and they don’t intrigue. (...) The female bosses I had in the past... eventually there was some personal conflict. It was either that they felt uncomfortable with me because of my look, my age, or because I’m skinnier... This has negatively affected our professional relationship... I had to leave.” (R8)

When it comes to gender differences, one interviewee stated that:

“Men are less willing to share information and know-how. When they learn something, they want to keep it for themselves, as a competitive advantage. Women share the information more easily.” (R5)

Problems with acknowledgement of PR as a profession

Finally, we’d like to stress out one outcome which we found especially important. The public relations profession has rapidly developed in the Czech society during the past three decades after the collapse of communism, which allowed free speech and media. Yet the profession as a communication professional or spokesperson is somewhat not clearly understood or valued by the public. Also, the level of “professionalism” due to the slow development of university education and professional courses (especially in the state and NGO sector) is not as high as in the countries with different political and economic history, such as Great Britain or the U.S. Some interviewees thus mentioned they struggle to explain the value of their work not only to their friends and family but also to their clients, colleagues and sometimes even for themselves.

“I feel like it’s still difficult to explain what I’m doing, that I bring some value for the society. I feel like PR profession is still undervalued if not even laughed at the society” (R6).

Some interviewees have stated that they needed to fight within their organisation (in-house) to gain the trust of their bosses and colleagues from other departments. This is probably due to the steady development of public relations namely in the state organisations in the past two decades (Kasl Kollmannová , 2013). Interviewees have acknowledged that more “PR” for their profession would probably help them to explain the added value of their work and find female role models. One young interviewee stated that in the public relations field “(...) *women are on the rise, but it’s progressing. We’d need more role models, media interviews with women professionals, or public lectures.*” (R7)

Limitations and Discussion

There are some limitations of this research we’d like to mention. Despite we’ve been trying to gain a diverse set of interviewees, in the end, all interviewees worked in the capital city (yet not everybody was a resident there at the time of the interview). Secondly, only two women of 15 interviewees had children – which we’ve found a major “obstacle” in a career path. Thirdly, intercultural differences must be taken in mind: the specifics in the Czech society, such as liberal upbringing, low religiosity, a high percentage of divorces and single mothers, and “feminist” social roles in a sense that “it’s normal for a woman to work and take care of the family at the same time”, a “double duty”. Last but not least, we’d like to stress out the still rather recent development of a PR profession since the late 1990s in a democratic society. Also, this research has been conducted through the lens of a sociological approach. If we chose the feminist approach, the interpretation of some quotes would be different.

Conclusions and Further Research

This research aimed to explore women's role in the public relations profession in the Czech Republic. We used semi-structured qualitative interviews with professionals working in PR and communication jobs (N=15).

We can conclude that based on our analysis, the women working in the public relations and communication field are skilled professionals, who take their job seriously and they acknowledge the specific conditions of this field. They are trying to keep a work-life balance, but on the other hand, they understand that the nature of the profession, especially as a spokesperson, is time-demanding and unpredictable. The work-life balance is considered almost a skill they have to learn or control. Most of the women were raised democratically in a liberal approach, fostering individuality, education and career path as a normal part of women's life. To pursue a career is not considered as something special or "new". Role models are often their working mothers.

The crucial outcome of the results is identifying the clash of expected social roles of a career woman and mother. This clash is still perceived as clearly contradictory, despite the interviewees think and talk about it with their friends, families and of course partners. It is almost astonishing, how automatically the women think (or act) by quitting their own job to manage family and work duties (especially with young children). The biggest "obstacle" or "problem" in their career path is how to balance childcare and work. In the Czech Republic, there are strong intercultural norms and patterns, such as usually three years of maternal leave with each child, which makes up to six or more years of a career gap. In the rapidly changing communication field, such a long break is considered a major problem with keeping up with the recent development in the ICT and media segment. Therefore the women automatically see this gap in their career as a reason or some kind of limit, which they cannot cross, if they want to have children. Note that this does not apply to women who don't have children – their chances in public relations are perceived as absolutely equal to men with no glass ceiling.

Interviewees felt very strongly that they personally as mothers had to take care of the child and transferring those duties to a nanny or husband is considered almost like an "unthinkable" or "fail" in their social role of a mother. The women – mothers among our interviewees stated that they eventually had to change jobs to accommodate more easily their family duties as mothers.

Even young professionals felt unsure about how a potential parental role would influence their career path. Interviewees have stated that they would welcome more professional role models, such as public personas or media interviews, who'd represent the profession of public relations expert and serve as a role model for their careers and also for the wide public, so that they'd feel their job is more valued and understood by the society.

Concerning the gender issues, we can conclude that interviewees did not refer to the toxic work environment, toxic masculinity or that they would need to accommodate to blokish style of communication. Contrary, they mentioned that they felt to adapt to the masculine style of communication of women-leaders were unnecessary or even contradictory. However, the self-identification and career ambitions vary between men and women. Women see men as more ambitious, striving for strategic tasks, even without enough experience. Women see themselves as those who have to then fulfil the duties or managerial decisions set by men because they feel they are more detail-oriented and capable of finishing tasks. The stereotype "communication technician" described by Broom as early as 1982 in the USA appears today in the Czech Republic as well – men are attributed more strategic, long-term goals, whereas women are considered and self-describing as those who "do the work", e.g. finalize tasks.

Since this research is the very first academic analysis of women professionals in the public relations field in the Czech Republic, we feel that further research would be much needed to understand in more depth the interconnected web of social and cultural norms and values, which predetermine and shape individual values and attitudes.

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